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## NATIVE COUNSELLING SERVICES OF ALBERTA

### FAMILY LIFE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Debbie and Jim\* moved to Edmonton from a rural northern community of Alberta during the economic boom times. Debbie was six months' pregnant. Both had limited employment backgrounds and little formal education. They saw Edmonton as place for opportunity, especially since their own community had so little to offer. The couple, along with other members of Debbie's family, gravitated to the Boyle Street area for their housing and services. Hampered by little education and few skills, Jim was unable to find steady employment.

Alcohol abuse, an established pattern in the couple's lives, continued in Edmonton. Also, violence was not an uncommon event in the relationship. Jim lashed out at Debbie verbally and physically and these incidents expanded her feelings of inadequacy. She believed she was responsible for their problems and therefore deserved the beatings she received.

The couple was totally unprepared for the demands of a baby and lacked the emotional stability, parenting and living skills required. The next two years brought two more children. The children were severely neglected, developmentally delayed and malnourished. A month after the third child was born, child welfare authorities intervened and placed the children in temporary wardship. The social worker saw Jim and Debbie as unfit and unloving parents. The couple on the other hand saw the actions of the social worker as final and definite, especially since she represented a vast government agency which communicated in intimidating, bureaucratic terms.

The child care worker referred the case to Native Counselling Services of Alberta. A family courtworker met with the couple to offer support, counselling, and information regarding the court case. She also accompanied the couple to the court hearing at which the judge ordered a year temporary wardship and stipulated as conditions that the couple obtain alcohol treatment and attend parenting skills classes. The Family

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\*Names and details of the case have been changed.

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Family Life Improvement Program (FLIP) is one of a network of programs of the ... a counselling services of Alberta. ... is a community-based program ... and counselling ... to families experiencing difficulties, and does so in an informally-structured, relaxed group setting. FLIP operates as an ongoing program in Edmonton and has recently started operation on a volunteer basis in Calgary. The overall objective of FLIP is to provide assistance to people experiencing difficulties with their family's relationships.

The first priority of the program is to assist women, who have had their children removed from their care by child welfare authorities, to strengthen their home situation in order that they will be prepared to provide a more acceptable level of care. Further, the program brings to parents an understanding that good parenting skills are learned and not an innate response, and that love is an essential ingredient in family relationships. It is not enough to have good parenting skills; self-esteem, and understanding are also necessary.

The program was initiated in 1977 by two volunteers. Both women had experience in social services and recognized the need for support in their own lives as well as the importance of preventative measures. These volunteers became full time staff members when Alberta Health Services and Community Health, Child Welfare Branch provided funding for the program. The need for such a program was evident. Approximately 5% of the women involved with Child Welfare authorities in Edmonton were from the ... only 1% of the Edmonton population was Native.

A program was developed which provides flexibility in topic and group size. The group meets four afternoons a week during each ten week session. Clients have the opportunity to join at any time and are held in a non-judgmental atmosphere. The program is held in a comfortable, relaxed setting. The program is held in a comfortable, relaxed setting. The program is held in a comfortable, relaxed setting.



courtworker recommended NCSA's Family Life Improvement Program and the judge agreed.

The Family Life Improvement Program (FLIP) is one of a network of programs offered by Native Counselling Services of Alberta. It is a community-based program offering support, guidance, and counselling to families experiencing difficulties, and does so in an informally-structured, relaxed group setting. FLIP operates as an ongoing program in Edmonton and has recently started operation on a volunteer basis, in Calgary.

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The first priority of the program is to assist women, who have had their children removed from their care by child welfare authorities, to strengthen their home situation in order that they will be prepared to provide a more acceptable level of care. Further, the program brings to parents an understanding that good parenting skills are learned and not an instinctive response, and that love is an essential ingredient in family relationships, but it alone is not enough; good parenting skills, self-esteem, and understanding are also necessary.

The program was initiated in 1977 by two volunteers. Both women had experience in social services and recognized the need for support of families facing breakdown as well as the importance of preventative measures. These volunteers became full time staff members when Alberta Social Services and Community Health, Child Welfare Branch provided funding in April 1979. The need for such a program was evident. Approximately 53% of the children involved with Child Welfare authorities in Edmonton were Native, while only 1% of the Edmonton population was Native.

A program was developed which practices flexibility in topic matter and range. The group meets four afternoons a week during each ten weeks semester. Clients have the opportunity to join the program at any time during the nine months of the year in which group sessions are held, thus, an individual or family can commence when the need is most immediate, without a waiting period.





FLIP meets three afternoons a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday) to provide information about family life. Topics covered include: Child Development, Self-Esteem, The Welfare System, Sexual Relationships, and Family Relationships. The subject matter is presented in the following manner:

- first, a discussion on a specific topic with group leaders providing information, encouraging participation, and offering insights and suggestions.
- followed by a film or audio/visual presentation which reinforces the topic presented in the lecture.

One afternoon is designated as a craft session day. The purpose of these are two-fold. First, to assist clients in developing an awareness of constructive leisure activities which can be carried out at home and, second, to provide an informal setting where clients can relate to each other on a one-to-one basis.

FLIP works towards enhancing the self-worth of the individuals involved in the program. It gives participants the opportunity for self-exploration and aims to increase self-esteem, assertiveness, knowledge plus the realization that they are not alone in their situation. Staff realize that changes must come from within before family relationship improvements can occur.

Perhaps the program's greatest strengths is the staff that operate FLIP. Three friendly, non-judgemental women create a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere. They deliver services at the clients' level and put themselves and their personal experiences into their presentations. By acting as positive role models, they give clients incentive and hope.

This unique service to the community utilizes the strengths and knowledge of Native people helping Native people. The relaxed, flexible supportive group approach gives individuals the information and resources necessary to facilitate changes.

*As for Debbie and Jim, their involvement with FLIP has spanned three years. The couple's attendance at meetings is sporadic. Sometimes*

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they attend for weeks steadily and then are absent for long periods of time. The FLIP workers have observed some progress in the last three years. When Jim started in the group, he often stated that societal factors were the root of his problems, but involvement in the group continued. He began to look at himself and take greater personal responsibility for his problems. Debbie, who was extremely shy and self-conscious, rarely participated in group discussions and would only express herself when intoxicated. She was continually experiencing mood swings which reflected in her appearance and hygiene. FLIP staff have witnessed a slowing of these cycles. Now, although still hesitant and quiet in the group setting, she is able to share emotions with FLIP staff in a one-to-one situation.

Debbie and Jim's problems have not ceased, but they have seen some life improvements. Both drink less and Jim's violent behaviour has decreased. The children remain in temporary care. Their struggle to reunite as a family continues.

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